Written Statement by Dr. Joel Beeson, Professor, Reed College of Media at West Virginia University, Director of Research and Extremism Reporting for 100 Days in Appalachia and Chris Jones, Extremism Researcher and Reporter for 100 Days in Appalachia

Introduction

Since 2016, our mission at 100 Days in Appalachia combines long-term academic research with investigative reporting activities focused on the ecosystem of online recruitment and amplification of extremism, and its manifestations in real world actions. Based on this work, we are invited members of Data & Society and Harvard Shorenstein Center's "Covering Hate" cohort, which has assembled journalists and researchers from around the world focused on threats to democracy and communities from mis/disinformation and increasing digital-mediated risks to society at large.

This research has been focused on risks for potential radicalization to far right extremism within susceptible Appalachian communities and identifying potential interventions and off-ramps for affected community members. We have briefed reporters at news organizations across the country, technologists at major platforms, members of the Just and Inclusive Society team at the Democracy Fund; fellow researchers at the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) Program on Extreme Right Radicalization Online: Platforms, Processes, Prevention; and researchers at the Center for Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism at the Middlebury Institute; The Bridging Divides Institute; the Institute for Constitutional Advocacy and Protection, and in panel events for the Council on Foreign Relations, among others, and we are actively collaborating with a network of academic and community organizations across the country.

Professor Beeson's scholarship encompasses decades of research on veterans, incorporating oral history and historical research on racism in the military, and digital forensic investigation of online radicalization in social media and gaming platforms. He has been a member of the Congressional Black Caucus Veterans Braintrust since 2008, and was invited in 2017 by the Hon. Charles Rangel to provide testimony on the historical parallels of the WWI era to the rising divisions, polarization and racism in our nation's present. Beeson is currently producing a feature-length documentary film on the vectors of radicalization in the Appalachia region.

Chris Jones attended high school at the Missouri Military Academy, and soon after graduation enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, serving two tours of duty in Helmand province, Afghanistan, as a machine gunner in 2010 and 2012. He received an honorable discharge in 2014 as a Corporal. Upon leaving active duty Jones began working as a freelance photojournalist, covering militias on the US-Mexico border as well as covering US politics. During this time, Jones began focusing exclusively on covering Afghanistan and the veteran community, continuing to freelance for various outlets and working as a monthly contributor to Pacific Standard magazine where he covered veterans issues and the war in Afghanistan.

Since 2020, Jones has been an investigative reporter in West Virginia covering domestic extremism for 100 Days in Appalachia. This position has given him a unique perspective on the groups and ideologies that wish to enact violence against the US government and civilians for political goals in a part of the country that is often overlooked by national level policy makers. From healthcare to the

economy, lessons learned in Appalachia are broadly applicable on a national scale. Extremism is no different.

Understanding how America's veterans are recruited to domestic extremist groups and ideologies is an incredibly important task in the moment we find ourselves in as a country. Like many issues affecting veterans, it's also a symptom of broader societal issues and phenomena, however veterans are a uniquely susceptible and targeted group. It's an issue that has personally affected Chris Jones, his veteran community and friends, and has guided his coverage as a journalist since 2016.

American domestic extremism is not new. Historically, the most consistent and deadliest forms of American domestic terror have been white supremacist in nature. As documented extensively by academic, journalistic, and federal law enforcement sources during the 1980s and 1990s, white supremacist organizations and ideologies shifted their stance to being explicitly anti-government as well as racist. In the past, these groups recruited primarily through word of mouth, secretive gatherings and pamphleteering that limited recruitment. But the development of targeted algorithms and viral nature of the social media business model has amplified these groups ability to disseminate ideology, recruit and organize at an unprecedented magnitude. Additionally, the development of the "leaderless resistance" model by anti-government groups makes tracking these groups and their most violent actors increasingly difficult.

What media has several times pronounced as "defunct, chaotic, riddled with "in-fighting" is what some of these groups – and the complex networks of actors that influence them – call strategy. The COVID pandemic has helped drive many more individuals together around an array of shared values coupled with an increasing distrust of societal institutions – notably not the military – which often supersedes any ideological clarity or adherence. They also are in a perpetual state of flux and mutation: Alt. Right, Proud Boys, militias, para military, boogaloo, Patriot Front, Patriots of Appalachia, Legion of St. Ambrose, Q-Anon, eco-fascists, and so on. Our research has identified how these movements are influenced by and/or tethered to morphing global networks – in Poland, the UK, Italy, Ukraine and elsewhere.

Most recent research finds a 'need for belonging' is key to extremism. This process is crucial for understanding the recruitment of veterans into extremist groups.

RECRUITMENT PROCESSES

Veterans are sought out by extremist groups through various mechanisms that are based upon the manipulation of community protection, duty and public service ideals and values:

1) Personal relationships with people connected to extremist groups. Introductions through family and friends.
2) Online content on social media that speaks to veteran-centric issues or concerns and invites veterans to commiserate or feel heard expressing grievances. In this way, extremist spaces are designed to feel welcoming as opposed to other communities that can feel alienating to veterans.

3) Public events and gatherings in which military equipment, clothing, and behavior are used to invite veterans to participate in a familiar experience.

Veterans are respected and listened to in extremist groups. They are validated and often "promoted" to positions of responsibility and power within these groups. Their ideological adherence is not as important to extremist groups as their ability to command and coordinate activities as well as inspire and recruit civilian members through their actions.

Extremists will attempt to isolate and alienate veterans from other communities and resources:

1) Extremist group messaging often warns veterans to avoid the VA system, painting it as being variously dangerous, ineffective, part of a conspiracy – preying on prevailing narratives of VA neglect or harmful practices. They will assure the veteran that they do not need VA care for issues, both physical and psychological.
2) Extremist groups will attempt to isolate the veteran from other communities, such as former comrades, family, volunteer organizations, school, and non-political associations that conflict with the groups goals or rhetoric.

Extremist groups provide narratively coherent explanations for real and perceived grievances that veterans have, and will actively work to provide a media ecosystem to the veteran that reinforces their rhetoric and bias.

Extremist groups will highlight and rally behind service members and veterans who embody their ideals and rhetoric to convince veterans and civilians that they are part of a lineage of "patriots" who have conducted justifiable violence against the state or fellow Americans.
Timothy McVeigh, Randy Weaver and Steven Carrillo were all veterans, and this is often hailed by extremist groups as confirmation of their patriotism. Indeed, high profile service members and/or veterans who espouse extremist or anti-government rhetoric are often made into figureheads and/or martyrs.

1) Once a veteran is an active and a willing participant in extremist groups, the group will attempt to leverage the veteran's network to their advantage for both recruitment and targeting.
2) For example, a service member or veteran who retains a Top Secret clearance or has access to certain information and/or databases can be used to access or influence government decision making and intelligence.
3) If the veteran's participation in extremist groups is kept secret, they can be hired in law enforcement, military contracting companies, or other positions of power and influence that can funnel intelligence, equipment, and/or recruits to the extremist group.

For the extremist group, the veteran will ideally begin to generate their own recruitment efforts through online content, conversations with fellow veterans, or aligning their actions to the group or the group's ideology as inspiration for like-minded veterans.

CASE STUDIES – PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF CHRIS JONES:

CASE STUDY #1: "R" in Arizona (2015-2018)

My first personal experience with domestic extremist groups began in 2015, a year after I left the Marine Corps. I traveled to Arizona with photojournalist and Army veteran Alex Flynn to document a high school friend who'd also recently separated from the US Army and was now a member of a border militia. Our friend's group patrolled sections of the US-Mexico border, often with explicit and implicit permission from CBP, with the explicit goal of detaining or deterring migrants from crossing into the United States. We spent weeks with this individual and his group, attending a militia training exercise in Colorado where at least 50 members of anti-government extremist militias gathered to conduct weapons training and hear speeches from conspiracy theorists, anti-government ideologues, and anti-government militia leaders. During this regional training event in 2016, a uniformed State Park Ranger pulled up to the group's camping area after people camping nearby complained to officials about gunfire coming near their camping grounds. The officer who got out had a III%-er tattoo at the base of his neck, and he assured the militia members that they were not in trouble and voiced his approval of the training they were conducting.

"R" was recruited to this militia group through participation in Tea Party political demonstrations with his father in the late 2000s. At a public Tea Party rally, he met one of the organizers of the militia group who encouraged him to join their group due to his veteran status and conservative political views. After a few meetings with the militia, he became an active participant and quickly joined them on anti-migrant operations, as well as showing up to conservative political rallies (sometimes armed) to provide "security" for these events. These events included protests against area mosques.

99.9% of the activities of the group in which "R" participated were entirely legal in the state of Arizona. At no point did he face prosecution for his participation in the group, though multiple other members faced federal charges for a variety of offenses. This individual's group participated in the standoff between militia members and federal law enforcement at the Bundy ranch in 2014, and years later many of the same members of this group would be arrested and one killed at the Malheur Wildlife Refuge standoff in Oregon in 2018.

The group that this individual belonged to was highly coordinated with an internal chain of command. It was a local offshoot of the national "III%-er" movement, but due to its frequent activities on the US-Mexico border, it was and is considered one of the "flagship" cells of the movement, and was often featured in local and national media as emblematic of the national organization.

In addition to "R," at least three other post-9/11 military veterans were involved in his group, and their participation was highly coveted by the group's organizers as well as local and national level leadership. Beyond their ability to provide training and expertise on weapons, communications gear and tactics, the presence of "R" and other veterans gave this group perceived legitimacy and stature with the public. It was a powerful recruitment tool for the group to engage motivated young men with a desire for proximity to war veterans and to emulate their military experience rather than a

desire to hurt other people for political reasons. The presence of veterans in their ranks also provides extremist groups access to veteran networks through social media, facilitating injecting their rhetoric and ideology into otherwise apolitical spaces and online communities.

"R" often described a sense of gratification from his participation in this extremist group. His military service had been frustrating, and he expressed extreme disillusionment with the federal government in general, in part due to how dramatically his family suffered from the 2008 economic recession. At the same time, he was intensely proud of his service, and the legacy of military service that ran through his family. He expressed the sentiment that his participation in this militia group felt, to him, like an extension of his military service. He and the other members of this militia did not feel they were causing harm to the United States of America, but were rather defending it from the Obama administration, which they largely perceived to be illegitimate and a tyrannical conspiracy rather than a genuine manifestation of the American political process. To them, they were upholding the Constitution in a way that the government itself would not. They also enjoyed explicit and implicit support and coordination with federal and state law enforcement, which made "R" and other participants feel that their activities on the border were endorsed by law enforcement which would shield them from any legal liability.

While they conducted patrols and raids along the US-Mexico border, sometimes spending weeks and months at small outposts in Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico, a majority of this group's interactions were social and occurred in residential Phoenix, Arizona. A day at the gun range, a weekend spent camping in the desert and playing with radios, a group text message thread to share jokes, information, and support each other during personal challenges; these were the activities that defined the experience of being in this militia group on a weekly basis more than paramilitary operations. Almost every event they held was followed by a BBQ and beers—and the conversations during these evenings were largely about social dynamics within the group, plans for new firearms and camping equipment.

When we last spoke in 2020, "R" had left the militia group in which he'd once spent much of his free time. As far back as 2016, he expressed frustration with being "used" by militia type organizations as a recruitment tool, while leaders within the group failed to respect his actual experience and abilities. This frustration, as well as other life priorities taking more and more of his time (such as work, relationships outside of extremist groups, and other interests), contributed to him largely leaving this type of activity and organization by 2020.

CASE STUDY #2: "BB" in West Virginia (2020)

"BB" is a young man in his early twenties from a rural part of West Virginia. Raised in a predominantly white rural community, he was raised on conservative values and media. Like many in West Virginia, he had a strong desire to serve in the United States military. Due to two DUIs while still a teenager, the ability to enlist in the Army and National Guard hinged on his ability to receive waivers for enlistment. After speaking with at least two different recruiters, one for the US Army and one for the National Guard, he produced four character statements from highly regarded community members. These included statements from his employer, his preacher, and an educator under which

he earned multiple professional certifications. However, once he provided the recruiters with these waivers, he was told to wait to hear back from the recruiters as to whether or not his enlistment package would be accepted. This processed dragged out for months, and continues to this day. This young man has called, shown up in person, and emailed recruiters on a monthly to bimonthly basis to check on the status of his case, and to enquire about other actions he could take to make him seem like a more attractive candidate for enlistment despite his past legal issues.

This enlistment process was confusing and protracted, and during the time he was attempting to enlist, "BB" became enamored by the "boogaloo" movement through social media. During the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns, rural communities shifted en masse to social media as their primary form of social interaction—which further exposed many individuals to a firehose of misinformation, extremist content, and other radicalizing media – without a filter of local community experiences to separate the relevant from the inflammatory.

"BB's" participation in online spaces was born of a desire to find community. This young man is intelligent, motivated, and driven by a strong sense of civic duty towards his local community, rather than a desire to see harm inflicted on civilians or government employees. His interest in the boogaloo movement—noted for its lack of political or ideological coherence—was in many ways a rejection of traditional far-right extremist groups and ideologies. He expressed a frustration with the racism inherent to established militia style organizations.

For a period of 5-6 months in 2020, I was deeply embedded in an online network of individuals based in West Virginia who aimed to create a local independent cell outside of the national movement, of which "BB" was a founding member. Like many "boogaloo" associated networks, this group of individuals was deeply interested in firearms, survival skills, political discussions, and a prevailing belief that some form of civil war in the United States was both imminent and inevitable. Unlike most online networks related to the group, this West Virginia based cell was actively disinterested in political activism or active participation in armed resistance against the United States government. Most of the conversations revolved around developing localized mutual aid capacity, welding and 3D printing projects, OSINT analysis, and finding availability for communal weekend outdoor activities. Most of the participants in this group ranged from 20-30 years old. Almost all where white men. Most expressed conservative and libertarian political ideas, and one is currently in federal prison for the sale and manufacture of illegal firearms modifications.

I have interacted with "BB" online and in person multiple times. When I revealed that I am a Marine Corps veteran, he asked me to assist him with his enlistment process. We spoke at length on the phone and in person about his interest in military service, and why the military and veterans were so appealing to him. He expressed a belief that military service is integral to "becoming a man"—a common sentiment in West Virginia, which has one of the highest rates of military service in the nation. He said that many of the male role models in his life had served, and he believed it would help him develop responsibility, as well as provide a path to financial stability and career development. He was specifically interested in the West Virginia National Guard as it would allow him to serve his immediate community, towards which he is fiercely proud and loyal, and a goal to be part of a community of men he could trust.

When I suggested to "BB" that participating in an organization whose national leadership and online content espouses explicitly anti-government rhetoric, he suggested that he would be openly willing to abandon this movement if it weren't for the sense of community and proximity to military veterans—myself included—that this West Virginia cell gave him. Simply put, this young man looked up to America's veterans as potential mentors and wished to emulate their service but did not know how to find and interact with military veterans outside of an anti-government extremist movement.

Case Study #3: "RIPAIDE" in Virginia (2020-2021)

"RIPAIDE" is a Marine Corps veteran who lives in suburban Virginia. He is a father, married and is currently attending college using his G.I. Bill benefits. When we met for the first time, he was an active participant in a local cell that was part of the broader Virginia militia and "boogaloo" movement. "RIPAIDE's" cell was active and participated in political demonstrations across Virginia. His group would often act in conjunction with a nationally known "boogaloo" group led by another Marine Corps veteran (who was separated from the Corps during training and never actually served in a fleet unit) who was adept at media manipulation, as well as a partnered militia group that was one of the most active during 2020.

"RIPAIDE's" participation in these groups came out of a sense of broad fear of national political trends and divisions, and a desire to form a small, localized group of likeminded individuals for potential societal unrest or civil conflict. "RIPAIDE's" group was primarily oriented towards firearms skills, survivalist training, and communications equipment. During 2020, his group fell under the umbrella of a statewide organization whose leadership was somewhat fractious but heavily invested in participating or having an armed presence during Black Lives Matter activities. According "RIPAIDE," this parent group was heavily surveillance oriented—developing HUMINT files on activists as well as their own members—and actively provided law enforcement with their findings. According to "RIPAIDE," the group had members who were active duty and reservist military personnel, as well as members of state and local law enforcement.

"RIPAIDE" and I first met at a protest in a coastal Virginia city where law enforcement had recently arrested and then released a prominent member of the "boogaloo" movement for a firearm violation. The protest consisted exclusively of 15-20 heavily armed movement adherents and affiliated individuals. They hosted a rally at the city's police station, where law enforcement had a subdued but prepared presence. While most of the protestors gathered directly in front of the police station and spoke with the media, "RIPAIDE" and his core group remained across the street and largely avoided interaction with the press, law enforcement, and others. Toward the end of the event, "RIPAIDE" and I had a short conversation where we shared our anxieties about the number of untrained heavily armed young men in the movement his group was associated with. We stayed in contact after his event, and RIPAIDE expressed more and more concerns with the state level leadership of groups his local group would work with during large demonstrations or other activities. He expressed his participation as being largely inspired by a desire to be prepared for a "worst case" scenario by having

access to an online community of individuals who shared skills in firearms, communications, OSINT, and trauma medicine. He expressly linked his participation in an armed militia style group to his uncertainty about the broader trajectory of American society, and repeatedly suggested he wanted to distance his personal affinity for firearms and survival training from broader political goals. He also expressed an interest and desire in fostering accountability and transparency for the groups he associated with, but was fearful of retribution by leadership and/or law enforcement.

After January 6, 2021, "RIPAIDE" largely withdrew from any affiliation or activity associated with groups that were present at the attack on the US Capitol or receiving media attention as "extremist groups." While he maintains his firearms, body armor, and other equipment, he has focused more on his education and career development through returning to college. While he has not said definitively whether or not he would return to participating in groups or activities associated with DVEs and AGVEs in the future, his access to educational opportunities and career development has provided him with a sense of purpose outside of extremist associated activity. However, he has confessed anxiety and a sense of alienation through the college experience, as well as some social isolation from the broader student and veteran population – the lack of a sense of belonging that drives young men to these groups to begin with. While he does not seem to be ideologically motivated to engage in extremist related activity, it is clear that losing the sense of community and collective action he gained by participating in militia style groups on the local, state, and national level remains a challenge.